KEYNOTE
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In her popular best-seller, *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott begins with an account of her conversion. "My coming to faith," she writes, "did not start with a leap but rather with a series of staggers." It is a strong story, told in strong language, occasionally language too salty to be used in the pulpit. Anne Lamott was brought up in an intentionally non-religious household. Her father, a California intellectual and a writer, was hostile to religion. He particularly didn't like Presbyterians, whom he called "God's Frozen People." Imagine what he might say about Episcopalians! In her childhood, adolescence and college years, however, religious questions kept surfacing in her life. As an adult, life became very difficult for her. Her father, a life-long heavy drinker, developed a brain tumor and started to die. Her best friend, a source of stability and sanity since childhood, developed cancer and started to die. Nothing was working—personal relationships, family, her writing career—and she was drinking and using drugs heavily.

One day, near the very bottom, she called an Episcopal priest, the new guy at St. Stephens; "a skinny middle-aged guy—my first impression was that he was smart and profoundly tender-hearted. My next was that he was really listening, that he could hear what I was saying and so I let it all tumble out—the X-rated motels, my father's death, a hint that every so often I drank too much.

I don't remember much of his response, except that when I said I didn't think God could love me, he said, 'God has to love you. That's God's job.' Prayer was out of the question. So he said, 'Stop praying for a while and let me pray for you.'" She writes, "He was about the first Christian I ever met whom I could stand to be in the same room with. Most Christians seemed almost hostile in their belief that they were saved and you weren't."(p. 43).

Slowly, she came to life, and her encounter with a church was critical in this story. Episcopalians do the heavy lifting—Presbyterians get the new member. Every Sunday morning in Marin City California she went to a flea market in the Greyhound Bus Depot parking lot. She went to watch people, enjoying wonderful ethnic food and checking out the tools, clothes, blankets, and household wares.

And then she began to hear music, gospel music coming from a little

church across the street, which turned out to be St. Andrew Presbyterian. Her description is classic. "It looked homely and impoverished, a ramshackle building with a cross on top, sitting on a small parcel of land with a few skinny pine trees." She knew some of the hymns from the time she used to go to church with her grandparents. She began to stand in the doorway and listen. "I couldn't believe how rundown it was, with terrible linoleum and plastic stained-glass windows. It had a choir of five black women and one rather Amish-looking white man and a congregation of thirty people or so, radiating kindness and warmth. During the time when people hugged and greeted each other, various people would come back to where I stood to shake my hand or try to hug me. I was as frozen and still as Richard Nixon."

She stood in that doorway for months, listening to the singing, watching as this poor little congregation brought huge tubs of food for homeless people. Finally, she stepped through the door and, as inconspicuously as possible, sat in a folding chair near the door in order to escape before the sermon.

It was the people - their singing together - that drew her back week after week, from the flea market to her folding chair near the door. Finally, after a medical crisis of her own, one Sunday morning the dam broke, the flood gates opened. She began to cry, walked home, and said to God, "I quit. All right, you can come in." She reduced her dependence on chemicals and eventually stopped drinking. A year later was baptized. Her little church rallied around her when she became pregnant, a second time, stood beside her, adopted her new son.

> **"I want to mention once again that I do not think I would be alive today if not for the people of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church, Marin City, California."**

Anyone who spends any time around the institutional church not church in the abstract, but the institution, with its worn-out linoleum and its 19th century hymns and its propensity to trivialize its own gospel and its tendency to make mountains out of molehills and what is far worse, molehills out of mountains, and its use of its own message of love and redemption to be unlovely and hateful and exclusive - anyone who knows anything about the institutional church becomes impatient with it and sometimes sick at heart over it. We want it to be more inclusive, more biblical, more relevant, more Christocentric, more businesslike, friendlier, bigger . . . .

"Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church," Frederick Buechner wrote, "would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash it all away, the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first

place." (*The Clown in the Belfry*, p. 158).

But then, every now and then, something like what happened to Anne Lamott at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church happens, and life is saved, recovered, healed, reformed, loved, appreciated, celebrated, turned around.

Every now and then, a human life is comforted, challenged, stimulated, reimagined, reanimated, renewed, reconciled, saved because of church. Church in some mysterious and magnificent way being salt of the earth and light of the world.

The great temptation of Christianity and the church has always been to get out of the world, to withdraw to a monastery, a mountaintop, or behind gothic stone walls, or today, to go inside, to private spirituality—personal spiritual growth.

"You are salt and light," he said. Your job is to live in the world on my behalf; to be seasoning for the world; to be light for the world.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his Nazi prison cell, writing to his parents the day after an assassination attempt on Hitler's life failed and therefore the day he knew, with a final certainty, that he was going to die: "During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the worldliness of Christianity as never before. I thought I could acquire faith by trying to live a holy life or something like it. Later I discovered and am still discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in the world that one learns to believe." (*Letters and Papers from Prison, July 21, 1944*).

It was an important moment in my own journey when I began to see that being a Christian, an intentional follower of Jesus, means living more deeply in the world, not less; that Jesus Christ does not want us to withdraw from human life in order to be faithful to him, but to plunge more deeply into life; the purpose of the enterprise is to make us more, not less, human; that Christian faith and Christian life are not adhering to a list of prohibitions which I, and many others I know, came to assume it was —don't do this, don't do that.

In fact, it is the exact opposite. Jesus Christ is God's great "Yes," to life; following him means living more intentionally, more passionately, exposing oneself to more love, more pain, more joy, more suffering, more laughter, more tears.

"You are the salt of the earth . . . light of the world."

For years the church I serve has understood its mission, its reason for being, in terms of Jesus' call to follow him into the world.

From its inception, on a busy human intersection, a corner where the whole world walks by, this church has opened its doors and its heart to

welcome in all who will come, and to send out into the world all who would follow.

Mission is why we exist—to make a difference—to be a light in the city. (Social Service Center, Counseling Center, Center for Older Adults, Children's Center, Day School, Tutoring, Summer Day, tennis, scholarships, Michigan Avenue Forum, Arts Festival, exhibits, recitals, music by the fountain.

And if I have learned anything in these past 15 years, it is that mission and evangelism not only must not and cannot be separated, but ultimately they cannot; that church growth strategies, standing alone, may produce market oriented numbers and results, but at the cost of the enterprise's soul. And that social activism apart from the word, the saving word of God's love in Jesus Christ, turns the enterprise into a mediocre social service agency, and there are enough of those already—75 at Cabrini Green

I have learned that mission is the source of evangelical energy; that evangelism is the source of missiological integrity that is compelling. (Mission—sower of evangelical energy; Evangelism—missiological integrity)

I have learned that churches that act like salt and light will in fact be interesting and lively and creative, and while whether they grow or not will be a product of factors over which they may have no control—e.g., no people out there to convert—nevertheless, they will be faithful and the world for 2,000 years has found it difficult to ignore a faithful Christian community.

I find it exceedingly tedious when a pastor of a corporate style church starts to brag. You know we all do it a little bit—find a way to work into the conversation the size of the budget, results of the last capital funds campaign. So let me say out front that Bill Franklin has given me the delicious license to brag. "Tell us about Fourth Church," he said, "and what you've learned."

Well, let me say right away that what I've learned is that I'm lucky—that the church I serve was built about 100 yards from Lake Michigan on a mud road that has become one of the busiest and most profitable—some are saying the most profitable—retail strip in the world. More money is earned in retailing per front foot on North Michigan Avenue than anywhere, I am told—which may or may not be true, but our neighborhood is unique. Our closest neighbors are Bloomingdales, Mashall Field, the Four Seasons Hotel, the Westin, the Ritz Carlton, Lord&Taylor, and FAO Schwartz, which prides itself on outselling the 5th Avenue branch here in New York City.

So thousands of people walk by our front door every hour. And more importantly, immediately behind all that commercial activity, there is a big city population living in high rises all around us.

We are, curiously, a neighborhood church. The John Hancock Building, directly across the street, reaches 100 stories into the sky—floors 40-94 are condominiums—700 of them, housing 1,700 people; that's more people than lived in the first town I served. There are 110 members of Fourth Church in that one building. That's more than were in the first congregation I served.

So we are surrounded by tourists and residents and the only competition is Holy Name Cathedral and St. James Episcopal Cathedral several blocks away.

More than anyone, I know the advantages of context, location, place, and while I'm sure growth is attributable to brilliant preaching and beautiful music, it is largely because we are there, with our doors open and—and this may be it, really—with a clear missional commitment to the world around us, in our case, the city.

I've told a bit—We're convinced that mission is key to our growth and that our responsibility is always to be evaluation and asking—what more more? What now?And in strategic planning, we're not all that good. We're way behind business, education, health care. You can't just do business as usual anywhere any more.

Our new plans include: Elderly housing; School Clusters; Community Center.

A few summers ago, two events happened which define what modern American urban life has become and also something of the way the health and vitality of the churches is a matter of importance for our whole society, certainly our cities.

One day in July the temperature at O'Hare reached 106 degrees, the hottest day in Chicago since official records have been kept. Most of us stayed indoors as much as we could. From Lincoln Park to Lake Forest people prayed that the demands on the electrical supply to power hundreds of thousands of air conditioners would not exceed the utility's ability to generate. At Cabrini-Green people opened all the windows -- although at 106 an open window is not necessarily helpful -- slept on bare floors, or sat outside all night, waiting for a blessed breath of moving air.

On Friday, something new and unexpected and tragic started to happen. The elderly, the sick, the people who live alone, the ones who double and triple-lock windows and doors and who live in such fear of violent crime that they never open a window and venture outside only when absolutely necessary, began to die. Before the heat wave broke, more than 600 Chicagoans had died of heat-related causes and the city was stunned.

Who was to blame? City government? The welfare system? Some folks even tried to place responsibility on the victims themselves for not understanding the threat the heat posed and asking for help from a

neighbor. How could it be that more than 600 people died of the heat in what we like to think is the premier American City, "The City That Works.'

And then it began to dawn on everybody simultaneously that the tragedy could occur, did occur, because something has happened to the notion of community, in the city, and perhaps throughout the land. Vulnerable, fragile, elderly people died because no one knew about their vulnerability and fragility. No one cared. No one much knew they existed in the first place. (Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone,* critique—now a book—reaffirms thesis—"declining social capitol—we have become increasingly disconnected from family, neighbors, friends, social structures; PTA/church/political parties."

The people who died of the heat had neither air conditioning nor community. And those of us who belong to churches, who live our lives in some way as the church were reminded, tragically, that the vitality and health and very existence of churches is a matter of life and death for the city.

Churches, I submit, enhance and celebrate, and sometimes give life, literally, to the city simply by being communities in which people know and care about one another. During the worst of the heat, members of the Caring Connection at Fourth Church called one another to make sure all were safe. The Center For Older Adults initiated an emergency telephone contact system to locate and talk to those most at risk to share information about cooling centers or arrange transportation to the church offices and center.

Nobody can document this, of course, but my hunch is that throughout the city the most effective response to the threat of the heat wave was the church, thousands of church members, and members of synagogues and mosques, calling one another, reaching out to one another in small acts of basic community that were life-saving. It was a reminder that the presence and health of the church is a very important matter.

(Putnam pays attention to Religious Participant in a chapter. So does Peter Drucker, who said, "the future of America is in the hands of the churches: that community is our fundamental need and that non-profits, churches mostly—are the only community left.")

The second event that summer was a memorial service, conducted by an Associate Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church and attended by a handful of church staff and a few members and several social workers. The event was not covered by the media. Mary Wojac was the person who had died, a 52-year old woman who looked 75, with no family, who had spent most of the past ten years on the streets of Chicago. Mary was not exactly homeless. Through the efforts of devoted and determined social workers and the staff of our Social Service Center, she had a room. But Mary was a chronic paranoid schizophrenic. She was sick -- but in the peculiar wisdom of our society currently not sick enough to be cared for publicly. Her

episodes were frequent and severe. In her paranoia she could not, would not, be in an enclosed space. She would not return to her room and lost track of the fact that she had a room.

All day long she sat on first one entry and then another, moving occasionally to the stone benches in front of the building on Michigan Avenue. Occasionally the Director of our Social Service Center, could persuade her to return to her room or to come inside the church for something to eat, or to get warm, or cool. During her episodes Mary spent the night somewhere around the building, huddled for warmth and safety beneath its grey storm walls. Mary, even in the mysterious depth of her psychosis, knew us.
When we moved a block away during renovation, she came along, continuing what was an anchoring and life-sustaining connection.

There was a sweet moment which occurred with some regularity. Our temporary quarters at 190 East Delaware were directly across the street from the Casino Club, an old and distinguished private club with an elegant canopy to protect its members from the elements as they come and go. It is a perfect place to be on a blustry or rainy day. Sometimes Mary, who had followed us, and who still would not come inside, spread her blanket on the doorstep of the Casino Club and lay down for an afternoon nap, for the night. Sometimes members of the Club, arriving at cocktail hour, or lunch, or departing for the day, had to carefully step over Mary enjoying her nap. Never did they ask her to leave, so far as I know and always, when I saw it, I smiled and thought maybe God was smiling at the gentle irony, but also because something of the essential nature of the church of God was being expressed.

When Mary died, of a heart condition exacerbated by her hard life, the church gathered to celebrate her life and to thank God for the gift of her life and to commend her to God's eternal care and to bear witness to a truth about the human community that occasionally gets lost in the city, namely that every person is a child of God, a valued part of God's creation, a brother or sister in God's family of humankind.

There is a virtual cottage industry out there analyzing and diagnosing, prescribing and predicting and scolding and generally fussing about the mainline churches in our culture. Each of us, I suspect, has more books on the dilemma in which we find ourselves than books on the incarnation, and each of us, I suspect, has enough opinions to write our own book. Some of us have.

In a book I wrote—a humbling experience, to say the least, and an experience that taught me enormous respect for people who do it all the time—I maintained that part of the resolution of the problem of declining numbers—we have people who love to put our numerical progressive decline in their computer and announce that if someone doesn't do something quick, the last living Presbyterian will die in about 47 years—my personal proposal about denominational decline is a variation on that great

bit of advice President Johnson received about Viet Nam, namely declare victory and get out; namely, stop counting and pay more attention to mission. In any event, part of the answer, I submit, is not to abandon our traditions in a misguided attempt to be modern, post-modern, or at least relevant. But instead, to plumb the tradition, to mine the tradition, to exegete and reclaim it, and reform and reshape the institution that it has spawned, but to hold tightly to the tradition.

In mine, at least, the most important part of the tradition is Reformation—*Semper Reformande*—always reforming. We're built on the conviction that nobody gets it exactly right all the time, and so the institutions and all the institutional paraphernalia—liturgies, creeds, practices—are at least occasionally subject to critical evaluation.

You may not be as congenial to that as we are—or are supposed to be. The embarrassing truth is that while we say it, we really don't mean it. We haven't tried anything really new for about 2 ½ centuries and I think it was one of you who said about us that nothing in the world is so fearsome—or unbending, uncompromising, unchanging—as one lone Calvinist in possession of the truth.

But the tradition—the Reformed tradition—the Anglican tradition—are precious gifts and I propose have within them the resources for renewal.

So the secret is not to jettison and go whoring after Babylon, running after whatever current fad is getting the most press—but to take a second and third look at the tradition itself and to do it with commitment and integrity. After all, who would have thought that Spanish monks, doing Gregorian Chant—would record a best-selling CD?

My argument is that our oldest tradition is a radical worldliness. Instead of sociological analysis, I propose that we go all the way back to the biblical tradition—to that incredibly fertile seed bed: the time of exile and dislocation and alienation, helplessness and corporate hand-wringing—gorgeous metaphors for what it means to be an Episcopalian—or Presbyterian—in the year of our Lord, 2000. Margaret Mead said that what we are—all of us over 40—exiles in a foreign country.

You know the story.

God's people have been taken from their city and transported to another city, to Babylon. Their city has been leveled and they are living far from home, their temple, their religion, their city. Understandably they are not happy to be where they are. They are not happy with their captors. They spend most of their time thinking about going home.

It is to them, the exiled community in Babylon, that a man by the name of Jeremiah writes a remarkable letter ...

"Seek the welfare of the city" he tells them. "Pray

to God on the city's behalf -- for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

That's a revolutionary idea. It certainly inverts the mode of thinking which was typical then -- as now -- namely that your welfare will be enhanced by getting away from the city, withdrawal from the city -- either physically or emotionally, by retreating into your own private spirituality.

God's people are to pray for the city and seek its welfare. Their own welfare is bound up in the city's. It is the task of the church -- not simply to be a refuge from the city, but to seek the city's welfare, to live deeply and intentionally in the city and for the city, to engage the life of the city creatively, and energetically, to be open to the city -- in every way we can think of because our own welfare is at stake.

One of Peter Drucker's favorite subjects recently is what can profit-making enterprises and non-profits learn from each other. Drucker says that the most successful profit-making enterprises are those that do not focus primarily on making a profit but on something he refers to as corporate mission." [See H. Cox, Fire From Heaven, p. 236]

Isn't it ironic that at the very moment churches are desperately trying to figure out how to survive, trying everything they can think of to grow, sounding, that is to say, for all the world like struggling business enterprises in search of new markets, and new customers, business is learning that part of the secret of success is to forget about it and pay attention to mission.

"Peter Drucker and the Prophet Jeremiah"; both saying the same thing. To stay alive, vital, successful, says Drucker, you have to have a mission, you have to be convinced that your product is going to be useful to your customer.

"Seek the welfare of the city -- for in its welfare is your welfare", the prophet Jeremiah said. All churches -- to the extent that they are alive and vital and viable -- know that they exist for the community around them.

Don Benedict once described the mission of the modern urban church as "keeping alive the rumor that there is a God." That is what the church of the future must do and be—a living reminder to a busy, secular, preoccupied world, of the transcendent, the holy, the sacred in the midst of life.

Our buildings themselves, sometimes elegant, sometimes ordinary, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, are nevertheless reminders of the presence of God in the life of the world. In the bustling metropolis, the church is a "grace note," whose architecture, windows, quiet strength, stand as a reminder of a religious tradition that extends all the way back to the beginning of time. It is exceedingly important to keep doors open—to invite the world in.

A section at the beginning of the Presbyterian *Book of Order* says that:

> **"The great ends of the church are the proclamation of the gospel for the salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world."[i]**

From the beginning, it has been about the transformation of the individual self by the grace, forgiveness and love of Jesus Christ, and the transformation of the world into God's intent, God's kingdom, God's commonwealth. At Mt. Sinai, the people of God were given ten laws which regulated their relationship with God and also the way they lived together in society, economically, politically, personally.

The uniqueness of the story of God and God's people is precisely that it is about theology and sociology, a way of believing in God and a way of living with one's neighbors. Believing in God puts one into a new social contract. Walter Brueggemann observes that in this tradition, "You cannot say 'God' without saying 'neighbor,' nearly hyphenated 'God-neighbor.'"[ii]

It is a defining moment when Jesus is asked "which commandment is first of all," and answers with two: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". The second is this, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."[iii]

It is both/and, not either/or; God and neighbor, theology and mission, personal and public transformation, evangelism and social action.

So the church is called and commissioned by God to tell the good news of Jesus Christ and to show the good news in transformed relationship within and acts of love and justice in the world. The world is hungry for that kind of religious wholeness. There is plenty of evidence that modern men and women are not much interested in a religion that is entirely private and personal and has nothing to do with the world. There is also evidence that modern men and women are not much compelled by church social service or social activist programs which are not related clearly and openly to belief in God and faith in Jesus Christ. There is plenty of evidence that when both happen in the life of a church, the Gospel is communicated, Jesus Christ becomes real, and transformation, personal and social, begins to happen.

The tutoring program at Fourth Presbyterian Church serves over five

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[i] Book of Order, Presbyterian Church(USA), G-1.0200; Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church(USA) 1997

[ii] Walter Brueggerman *The Covenanted Self, Explorations in Law and Covenant,* Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1999, p.79.

[iii] Mark 12:29-31, New Revised Standard Version

hundred fifty children from nearby public housing projects plagued by violence, unemployment and poverty. The tutors are all volunteers, mostly young urban adults working in law firms, banks, brokerage and hospitals, mostly non-church members, many non-believers, or ex-believers. The tutors meet their young students once a week for an hour and a half in the church building. The church itself is growing. And in every monthly new members class there are always several young adults who make their witness:

> **"I was invited to be a tutor by a friend, signed up, worked with a student—in the church for six months. I began to care a lot about my student, and then one evening, I'm not sure why—maybe it was the music I heard from the choir rehearsal, or the picture of Jesus on the classroom wall, whatever—one evening I connected my being here tutoring a child with Jesus and what he said and stood for. So I started to attend on Sunday morning."**
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> **It is a powerful moment when I am privileged to administer the sacrament of baptism to several young adults, kneeling in front of the congregation, often with tears of gratitude and love in their eyes.**
>
> **Religion that expresses its theology in mission will communicate much about itself. Churches that hold together their beliefs about God and their love for the world and their neighbor will be vital churches.**
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> **Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall, has helped us understand the new situation in which the church finds itself as the 21st century begins. Hall describes the "End of Christendom," the centuries-old accommodation between the Christian church and its political host: Roman Empire, Great Britain, the United States of America. The church of the future will have to live in a secular environment which extends no special privilege to religion; or to one particular religion above others. Hall thinks the end of Christendom is a good thing because it presents the church with a new opportunity to be authentic and true to itself, an effective proclaimer of Good News and a vital expression of God's love and justice. People will come to church in the future, for instance, not because of social expectations, pressure, or even family tradition. All that is gone now. People will be in church because they want to be and because they are hungry for meaning, searching for community, seeking for some sense that their lives have meaning and significance.**
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> **The church has a new opportunity to make an authentic witness in its worship, the quality of its community life and the passion of its mission in the world, aGod-given opportunity to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and to become that good news.**

Harvard theologian Diana Eckin in her book, <u>Encountering God</u>, uses her

experience and expertise in the religions of India to reflect on Christian faith and practice. In a chapter on the Holy Spirit as the lively presence of God in life, she describes the Hindu Shakti shrines in India ... "lively, colorful, noisy, people crowding in, piles of red garlands; the shattered coconuts slammed to the pavement as offerings; hundreds of hands reaching to touch her sacred flame. Shakti shrines are described by a Hindi word -- Jagarita -- which means "fully awake." Professor Eck writes:

> **"When I think of the churches of Boston I would not call many of them Jagarita. We do not gravitate toward them after work. If we did we would find them locked up tightly. There is a sense of deep sleep that has settled on the churches, she says. There is no sense of the power and lively presence of God. [Encountering God, p. 138,139.]**

Jesus said, "You are the salt of the earth -- the light of the world." We,--we are salt of the earth, light of the world. We exist, we live, for the city. Our purpose, our mission is to live for the city, in the name of God to serve its needy; in the name of God to create and nurture human community.

And, in the name of God, to proclaim, in our life together, the truth of Jesus Christ, that it is in living for others, corporately, but also personally, that we realize our own lives; that it is to the extent that you and I live for others that we become who God has created us to be, that it is to the degree that Jesus Christ lives in us, that we know our salvation.

"Seek the welfare of the city -- for in its welfare you will find your welfare" -- which is, after all, another way of saying the most important thing he ever said:

> **"Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the sake of the gospel, and for the sake of the city, will save it." (Mark 8:35)**